

## **Journalism or Politics? Early Newspapers in Winnebago County**

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In the first half of the nineteenth century, American newspapers were decidedly partisan. This was certainly true in Winnebago County, Illinois.

The first newspaper in Rockford was the *Rock River Express*. It began publication on May 5, 1840, with B. J. Gray as editor. At that time there was a lack of news. With a village of three hundred, there was not much to write about. This newspaper's first purpose was promoting William Henry Harrison in the election of 1840 for the presidency.

When it came to politics, the newspaper was Whig. During the election, the paper followed the campaign extensively, always in favor of the Whig Party. Every issue carried an "advertisement" showing the "Whig nominations for president, W. M. H. Harrison of Ohio for President and John Tyler of Virginia for Vice President." It then went into detail, explaining the importance of the upcoming elections. "To the Whigs; the importance of the contest next Monday should [lead] every Whig to attend and be active at the polls . . . [U]pon the coming election will depend life and death of the future prospects of our country."

Following the election, the newspaper published the percentage of votes among the states. "By last night's mail we had the gratifying news that Louisiana had declared Harrison by a majority."

As the first newspaper, the *Express* led the way for many other

publications. The *Rockford Star* was the second newspaper in Winnebago County. It was founded in the fall of 1840 and owned by Daniel S. Haight, Daniel Howell, and Adam Keith. They created this paper to support the Democratic Party. The editor was Philander Knappen.

The first issue of the paper ran an editorial explaining its goals: “It is no more than right that a political journal asking contenance and patronage of the public for its support should, at the out set in general terms avow its political features. The *Star* will be devoted to the dissemination of the principals of Jefferson, Madison, Jackson, [and] Van Buren.”

The *Star* pushed its readers to the polls, like the *Express* had. “Democrats, no matter whether it rains, hails, or snows, be at the polls and be there at least two hours before they open, talk to the Federalists—tell them the truth.”

When the Driscoll tragedy occurred, Knappen had only been in Rockford for a little while. This event began when Taylor and David Driscoll killed John Campbell on June 26, 1841. Because the sheriff did not do anything about the situation, the people took matters into their own hands. These “Regulators” wanted justice to be served. “Knappen did not understand the temper of the people; and his strong denunciation of the summary execution of the outlaws aroused intense indignation.” Knappen continued to be punished by Rockford. On July 1, the *Star* published two letters after the Driscoll trial. The paper criticized the trial and execution. The community supported the Regulators. After several local citizens broke into the *Star*’s office and overturned the press and type, Knappen left town. July 1, 1845 was the last issue of the *Star*.

The *Rockford Pilot* was published briefly, July 22, 1841, to October, 1842. Still, the *Pilot's* career contributed to the Democratic Party. John A. Brown was its editor. After he was defeated for Representative Brown's paper stated on October 30, "The Democrats had sustained a local defeat of their entire ticket. With this number the *Pilot* dies. Its death is a natural and quiet one. No violence from enemies. . . It dies from the want of a proper support."

As the *Express* and *Star* had published political "ads," the *Pilot* also ran Democratic ads, such as, "Democratic nominations for Governor Adam W. Snyder and for Lt. Governor John Moore." The *Pilot* covered many issues of the time and gave news from Washington. "Two bills were introduced by Mr. Young as follows: A bill granting to the state of Illinois as an additional quantity of land to aid in the completion of the Illinois and Michigan Canal; and a bill to amend an act entitled An Act to Appropriate the Proceeds of the Public Lands." In addition the paper strongly criticized the national debt of \$17 million and the National Bank.

The *Winnebago Forum* began publication on February 17, 1843, as a Whig paper. The editor was Ambrose Wright. The *Forum* used abandoned equipment that had belonged to the *Rockford Star*. Wright retired from the *Forum*, August 18, 1843, when he sold the paper to Colton. Wright went on to work for many other newspapers, including the *Prairie Farmer*, *Herald of the Prairie*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.

Colton turned out to be more successful than Wright when it came to managing the *Forum*. In February, 1844, Colton changed the *Winnebago Forum* to the *Rockford Forum*. The *Forum* came to be the most successful newspaper in Rockford in that period, increasing its circulation from two hundred to six hundred.

The *Forum* took the same approach toward politics. It was stated in the first issue: “The paper will be firmly Whig—and that because we believe in the main principles of the Whig party.” Unlike the other papers, it did not advertise political candidates. In the *Forum*’s first issue, Colton explained the reasons: “We do not place at the head of our columns any candidate for presidency—not because we have no choice of candidate, but because we do not deem it essential.” It continued, “The Whigs hold a convention; and we are content to abide that—Till then and afterwards, we trust Henry Clay is our man.”

Newspaper journalism claiming to be non-partisan and independent did not emerge in Winnebago County for many decades. Party politics and the news were mostly one and the same. [From Charles A. Church, *History of Rockford and Winnebago County of Illinois*; Hall C. Nelson, ed. *Sinnissippi Saga*; *Rock River Express*, (May 5, May 19, June 30, July 28, 1840 and Aug. 4, 1841); *Rockford Forum*, (Feb. 21, 1844); *Rockford Pilot*, (Jan. 20, Jan. 27, Feb. 3, and Feb. 10, 1842); *Rockford Star*, (Oct. 22, and Oct. 29, 1840); and the Winnebago Forum, (Feb. 21, 1844).]

